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Maude dragged her suitcase down from a high shelf in the bedroom closet and opened it on her bed. She was staying with her friend Lindsay, who had graciously offered the use of her guest room when she heard about the break-up.

"You can have the room for as long as it takes," Lindsay told her. She didn’t know if her friend meant until David came to his senses, or she came to hers.

Days after the sudden dissolution of her seven-year relationship, Maude had returned to the

apartment she shared with David to collect her things, still grappling with the shock and the unanswered question of why it had ended.

"There isn't someone else," David had assured her. It wasn’t her stance on having children, either — something he’d always claimed to be fine with. It wasn’t any one thing at all.

“We’ve just become different people,” he said. “We’ve run our course. It’s time to move on.”

With no real plan, Maude began packing. She emptied her closet first, then her dresser. After that, she tucked away perfume bottles,

half-empty prescription bottles, a bathrobe, and a hair straightener. She was about to close the suitcase and move on when she remembered a pair of socks that she hadn’t seen yet. They were black and were polka-dotted with Maude and David’s smiling faces—a gift from his mother the first Christmas they were together. Maude was already head-over-heels in love with him, even if he still hadn’t yet referred to her as his girlfriend. It took the socks, and the gift tag that read “For David and his Girlfriend”, for him to finally start using the “G” word with her. The memory of him

calling her his girlfriend for the first time caused new tears to spring into her eyes.

She found the socks under the bed, being worn by David as he lay amongst the dust bunnies. Maude quickly realized this was the David from that first Christmas — the aloof twenty-eight-year-old who still brought his laundry home for his mother to do and wasn’t comfortable with the idea of calling someone his girlfriend. This David would never have been able to look his girlfriend of seven years in the eye and tell her they’d run their course.

She hoisted David up and flopped him onto the bed. He was so young. Handsome too, but in an approachable way, that’s what drew her to him. She’d been so charmed by his mix of looks and friendly good humor, she was willing to overlook his shortcomings. Hell, she was even drawn in by those as well. He was a project, something to fix. She worked so hard to help him grow into the man who would so gently shatter her heart into pieces. In a way, this was all her fault.

She shook her head at the thought, then grabbed his legs and flopped him into the suitcase.

She dragged the suitcase to the bathroom to get her bath scrubber and a few things from the medicine cabinet. Steam billowed out as she opened the door. David was in the shower, singing into the bath scrubber like it was a microphone. They had a habit of singing together in the shower. She couldn’t remember when it started, but it quickly became a cherished ritual.

“Loving you, isn’t the right thing to do,” he sang, his baritone echoing off the tile.

“How can I ever change things I feel?” she responded, her voice

cracking slightly. He had always been terribly embarrassed at the thought of singing in public. He would only sing for her, and only in the shower.

“If I could, Baby I’d give you my world.”

She had always loved that this moment of intimacy and vulnerability was their thing and that he only ever felt comfortable singing to her. She loved that this was hers and hers alone.

“How can I, when you won’t take it from me?”

Her eyes burned with fresh tears that she blinked back. She blew her

nose, then pulled the shower curtain open, wrapped her arms around his waist, and put a shoulder into his stomach, folding him over her back. Then she dropped him and the bath scrubber into the suitcase.

Was there an easy way to disentangle two lives so entwined as theirs? The living room in particular was a shrine to their couplehood. Most of the furniture they'd bought together, each carrying with it a memory of reluctant strolls through furniture stores and frustrating attempts to navigate each piece through their narrow front door. There was the

stack of board games, the row of books they'd read that year on the windowsill, the wobbly antique chair they bought at an estate sale and reupholstered together. On the couch was the extravagantly expensive blanket they both insisted was worth the cost because you can't put a price on comfort. All of it inseparable from who they were as a couple.

She took the chair, the board games, the books, and the blanket and threw them all in the suitcase. She found David lying underneath the blanket, a video game controller in his hand, a half-empty beer bottle resting against his hip.

How many times did she come home to this scene? How many plans had been canceled over the years because he had gotten too drunk pre-gaming? Year two, that was a rough one. Their fights shook picture frames from the walls. She thought she would end it a dozen times. But she never did. Instead, she leaned into the headwinds of his addiction, stubbornly determined to help him conquer his demons. And he did.

A sunbeam shimmered in a line of drool running from the corner of David’s mouth. She gently picked up the beer bottle and set it on the

coffee table, then she lifted him up and set him down in the suitcase.

By then, Maude had started to become overwhelmed by how little of their shared life was solely hers. Who was she, without him? Who was he without her? She had invested so much of herself in him that she no longer remembered who she was. If she didn’t know who she was, would anyone else?

She heard laughter as she entered the kitchen. David was in there, along with Alex and Britt, a couple they became friends with when they first met. The three of them were wearing matching red tie-

dyed shirts that said “Sea Cows”, the name of the recreational soccer team they joined as singles looking to meet new people. The four of them quickly became two couples who became fast friends. As she pulled cooking dishes and favorite mugs from cabinets, she watched David’s sheepish body language and remembered their first conversation at the bar after their first game, where he admitted he struggled with social anxiety and talking to people made him nervous. Except her, he said. Even though they’d just met, he wasn’t nervous at all talking to her.

Maude thought about all the threads extending outward from their relationship to the network of friends they'd accumulated over the years. Would they side with him? Would they divide them up, like assets in a divorce? How would she face them, knowing that most of them had never even known her as anyone but David's girlfriend? David's poor, pathetic girlfriend, who hung on for seven years waiting for a proposal that never came.

When she was done in the kitchen, she noticed a spare "Sea Cow" shirt draped over David's shoulder. She pulled it down and saw the

large bleach stain on the collar that identified it as hers. She wondered if she would even need it anymore, before balling it up and tossing it in the suitcase. The three Sea Cows went into the suitcase as well, deposited with slightly more care.

It was time to go. Before she left, she surveyed the contents of the suitcase one more time. But no matter how much she dug, she couldn’t find the explanation she had been searching this whole time for.

Maude stayed with Lindsay for a while, spending much of her time in her room, sifting through the

contents of the suitcase. She took it everywhere, even on the rare occasions when Lindsay would convince her to go out and socialize. Every night was the same — something would remind her of David and the rest of the night was spent tearfully pouring over the contents of the suitcase with anyone who would listen.

She dragged the suitcase to work, took it with her when she went to see her mother, even brought it with her on dates, when she thought she was ready to try that. After a while, people stopped asking why she still lugged that heavy piece of luggage around. In

the absence of her relationship, it became what she was known for. If she was honest with herself, the truth was, she didn’t know who she was without it.

The suitcase remained a permanent accessory at Maude’s side, but as the weeks turned to months, she became less aware of its burden, until one day the suitcase hardly weighed anything at all. On that day, she told Lindsay she might be ready to look for her own place.

It was a bright spring day full of promise when she signed a lease on a cute, one-bedroom flat facing

a quiet city park. Afterward, the two women walked down the block to a coffee shop. It was a bohemian place in a style Maude had always preferred, with a bulletin board advertising band openings and social groups, a battered old couch, and a small stage where open mic nights were performed. As they excitedly talked about the potential of the new place, Maude felt something in her opening up and revealing in its curves and edges a piece of the puzzle of who she could be and how comfortably this new version of her could fit into a place like this.

That night, Maude brought the suitcase out to the curb and rested it against some garbage cans. She had only just turned away when a noise caused her to turn back. There, in the dappled light of a street lamp filtered through a ginkgo tree, a bent woman was struggling to move the suitcase away from the curb. She looked at Maude with pleading eyes as she pulled on the bag, her heels sliding on the pavement, breath hissing between clenched teeth, her face turning shades darker with the effort.

Maude stilled the woman with a gentle hand on the shoulder.

"It's time to move on," she said.

They sat together on the curb and opened the suitcase. As soon as the bag’s contents started spilling out onto the sidewalk the woman began pawing through the heaps of memories with an almost hysterical desperation. Maude watched with pity as her frantic searching took her deeper into the bag. Soon only her legs were visible, and a moment later, the woman had disappeared into the suitcase entirely.

When she was gone, Maude collected what had fallen out, returned it to the suitcase, and

then closed it. She kissed her fingertips and placed them on the handle, and smiled. She felt lighter than she had in months, maybe years. She laughed as she drifted upward, through the branches of the ginkgo and into the night sky, until the brilliant lights of a city spread out before her like a glimmering sea of endless possibility.